

Community Libraries in England: Empowering Volunteers and a catalyst for change

Abstract

This paper explores the balance between austerity localism (a reaction to public budget cuts) and progressive localism (a challenge to neo-liberalist hegemony) in the transfer of libraries to volunteer management. It is based on interviews in libraries in a northern city. Libraries in the U.K. are vulnerable to budget cuts as the extent of statutory provision is ambiguous and transfer to volunteer management may be the only viable alternative to closure. Volunteers felt compelled to act to save their libraries from closure, but in doing so were developing new services and ways of providing them. This showed a nuanced balance between a reaction to austerity and an approach which could be regarded as 'progressive'. The paper contributes to the meaning and use of the concept of 'progressive localism', and understanding the synergy between this and 'austerity localism' within the asset transfer of library services.

Key words; volunteer, austerity, public services, neoliberalist hegemony.

Introduction

Between 2010 and 2014/15 cuts to welfare benefits and tax credits of £18 billion were outlined, along with £53 billion cuts in budgets of local authorities and government departments (Clayton, Donovan & Merchant, 2016). This has provoked local authorities to cut non-statutory services (Hastings, Bailey, Gannon, Besemer & Bramley, 2015) including closing leisure facilities and libraries. In England Public Libraries News reported that 242 libraries closed, with 100 being taken over by volunteer groups or social enterprises, between 2011 and 2016 (Public Libraries News, 2016), although this estimate is not comprehensive as it relies on reporting by local activists. An additional 103 mobile libraries have also closed.

Volunteer led groups taking over management of public leisure services has been termed ‘asset transfer’ (King, 2013). A distinction has been made between ‘austerity localism’ and ‘progressive localism’. This paper explores what these terms mean in the context of volunteer led libraries. The market for library management is different to that of sports centres, which is dominated by nine national operators which held 61% of the contracts with local authorities (Livsey, 2015). Only a few small sports centres are managed by volunteers (Findlay-King, et al 2018). A criticism of transfer of the management of leisure facilities to national providers is that they will be unable to transform the sense of ownership by the local community and develop associative democracy (Nichols, et al. 2015). It should be easier for libraries to do this, as they are inevitably led by local volunteers. In contrast to sports facilities local government provision of a library service is statutory, but only to the extent that it must be deemed to be ‘comprehensive’ in an overall local authority area (Public Libraries and Museums, 1964). However, ‘comprehensive’ is undefined. A further contrast is that libraries require less specialist skills than sports centres to run them.

Austerity localism and progressive localism

For Featherstone (et al., 2012, p.177) the defining characteristic of austerity localism is that the driving force is to prevent facilities being closed as a consequence of public funding being reduced. ‘Progressive localism’ has been described as when volunteer groups “transcend their immediate locality and ... feed into broader social and political movements that aim to transform national and international policy frameworks, thereby reversing the neo-liberalisation of inter- and extra-local relations” (Featherstone et al. 2012, p.118) and underpins new forms of community provision (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2015; Hastings, et al 2015). ‘Progressive’ is defined by a motivation and ability to challenge the hegemonic assumption that cuts in public expenditure, and increasing income inequality, are inevitable and necessary. Hegemony is used in the sense applied to cultural studies (Williams, 1977) to

mean not only ‘ideology’ or control as manipulation or indoctrination, but the ‘whole body of practices and expectations ... shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world’ (Clarke & Critcher, 1985). It includes practices and expectations which embody assumptions preventing relations of domination and subordination being challenged. In a classic text Clarke and Critcher used it to understand leisure as juxtaposed to paid work, and as consumption rather than experience. In the case of asset transfers, hegemonic assumptions would include the need for cuts in public services to reduce the public sector financial deficit in order to satisfy the confidence of international capitalism in the UK market, and the limitations this imposes on democratic debate (Schafer and Streek, 2013); while at the same time ignoring, and implicitly condoning, the growth of social and economic inequalities (Levitas, 2012). They would include the necessity of replacing paid work by volunteers within the social organisation of labour; as has happened in social care (Levitas, 2012, p.331). ‘Asset transfer’ could be interpreted as concealing the fact that paid employees were being replaced by volunteers, and the ‘assets’ being transferred may be associated with considerable liabilities.

So is ‘progressive’ possible? Is it just academic wishful thinking, which in the words themselves embodies normative judgements of what is ‘better’. Levitas (2012, p333) gives examples of working class organisations over the last 200 years with utopian visions: Crisp’s (2015) contemporary study of Work Clubs claims to provide a practical example. These were introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011 to provide activities to help participants obtain paid work. Some recognising that there was little chance of helping their ‘clients’ gain paid work and rejected performance being measured by the numbers of clients placed in paid jobs. Crisp draws on Williams’s claim (2014: 2807) that the apparent co-option of voluntary and community organisations into neoliberal structures of governance can develop practice which challenges established policy orthodoxies by ‘rework(ing) and interpret(ing) the values and judgements normalised in the regulatory frameworks of government policy

(and)bringing alternative philosophies ... into play'. Crisp's interpretation of 'progressive' is based on the work clubs rejecting the main focus of their activity as being to help clients get a paid job. But the evidence suggests this was largely pragmatic, because there were not paid jobs, or worthwhile ones, to be obtained; and the work clubs were underfunded to achieve this end anyway. Crisp's argument would have been more convincing if the work clubs had redefined 'work', the value of unpaid work, and challenged the view that paid work was the only source of social inclusion; in the way that some programmes promoting volunteering have (Nichols and Ralston, 2011). Thus while one might not expect work clubs to cite sociological theory or formulate visions of an alternative social organisation of labour exactly what behaviour can be interpreted as 'progressive'? Would it include challenging the need for cuts in public expenditure, opposition to replacement of paid librarians with volunteers, or a vision of a 'better' way of organising labour to achieve social welfare?

The transfer of libraries in a Northern Council.

In 2013 the local authority in which are libraries are situated supported 28 public libraries, including a central library. A report published in September 2013 recommended 16 libraries be closed unless they could be transferred to volunteer management. Of these 11 were designated as 'associate' libraries and 5 – 'co- delivered'. 'Associate' are completely managed by volunteers. Co-delivered are led by an umbrella organisation – such as a church or community forum, but volunteers are still involved. In February 2014 bids were invited from groups to take over management of these libraries, with effect from the last week of September 2014.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers in eight of the transferred libraries in July 2016. Five were associate libraries and 3 co-delivered. All the libraries had

reopened at the end of September or early October 2014, so all had experienced 22 months of operation under their new status. For purposes of this paper they are indicated by initials, A to H.

Interviews were structured to explore broad themes emerging from previous research into the transfer of sports facilities (Nichols et al 2017). An interview was also conducted with the Council's library volunteer development officer, who had been in this new post, created to support the new library structure, since September 2014. Codes were devised to represent austerity localism and progressive localism, both during transfer and subsequently.

Results

Austerity localism at, and before, transfer

There was strong consensus among volunteers that the council were motivated solely by the need to react to budget cuts. As the council development worker explained; 'We just want to keep these libraries going ... it's an unfortunate set of circumstances that led to it and now we've just got to make the best of it.' Volunteers were aware of the council review which asked, 'the citizens of (...) to say what they wanted to happen about their libraries and explaining ... they were going to close, potentially 16 libraries unless local communities stepped forward to run them' (Library E). There had not been discussions about passing management of libraries to volunteer led groups before this. The council's financial imperative was illustrated in the only case of potential private investment, Library D. This building needed considerable repair, being built in 1904. The council received proposals to manage the library from both the volunteer led group that had campaigned to prevent closure, and a local brewery, that offered capital investment to convert most of the building into a bar and café, while retaining some for a library. The council would only consider the volunteers'

proposal if they agreed to work with the brewery: the volunteers saw this as ‘a forced partnership between us and the (brewery) and the council’. (Library D).

There was a perception that the council were forced to act by protests against closures: ‘they were faced in April/May 2013 with recognition that they were not going to get away with closing 16 libraries. ... They had resolved that they were going to save a lot of the money, they had no plan.’ (Library H).

All the volunteers were aware that the situation was a consequence of budget cuts: ‘And when we saw them sheets of expenditure with the cut backs with the bloody conservatives, the Council lost 84 million. And you could see little things going. ... And volunteers can do a library I knew where they were coming from but I still wanted to fight them to say, you're not having our library. So I said we'll do it.’ (Library G)

However, volunteers were also aware that the council were reluctant to close libraries and make staff redundant: ‘I got a feeling that they were a bit upset about the process. I got a feeling they wanted to stand behind ‘em (paid employees) but there weren't a choice, it were happening, they got to save money’. (Library F)

There was considerable sympathy for paid librarians who were losing their jobs or being transferred, and a sense of conflict between the volunteers wanting to save their own library while at the same time not wanting to acquiesce in replacing paid staff. This was felt most acutely by volunteers who had themselves worked in the library service but wanted to save their local library. A retired librarian who had worked for the Council libraries for over 40 years expressed these views:

‘I was retired about 4 years and then it started ... the council are going to close so many libraries ... I just thought I couldn't see this library go. ... So they started having meetings for people that were interested in being volunteers here. And my colleagues ... that had gone to work at ... other libraries, sent me to Coventry. ... it was very acrimonious because of the staffing issue and it was terrible. And nobody wanted this to happen because of the people that worked in the library were lovely; and we enjoyed coming in. but we didn't want to lose it (Library A). A different library expressed similar views: ‘... it was giving in. it was doing the tory government’s work for them. ... We were taking over librarians’ jobs. The phrase “blue rinse job thieves” was used.’ (1) (Library E)

So there was a consensus that; the process was a reaction to austerity by the council and the volunteers, it created conflict between paid staff and volunteers, this was regrettable, but something that had to be accepted to keep the libraries open. A volunteer summed this up: ‘The political thing, we've never really engaged with it, is the reality of the thing. And we might not have chosen that the council closed them or handed them on but that was the decision that was taken so you either go with that or let the libraries close. So we've always been quite pragmatic about that.’ (Library C)

Progressive localism at transfer

Two libraries took further steps to oppose or challenge transfers, and three were led by a vision of promoting a better society. This is closer to what Featherstone (et al, 2012) would regard as ‘progressive’.

At Library D, the proposal to work with a brewery ‘brought out all sorts of schisms within the community; ... a very hard core set of the community who were fundamentally opposed to the library not being in council library management, organisation, or ownership; through to

other people' who were supportive of working with the brewery as it would revitalise the area' (Library D). At Library H the campaigning group challenged the validity of the council's 2013 plan, which was the basis for designating Library H as co-delivered. The challenge was reported in the Times newspaper, which the group felt had moved their actions from 'being just about the Council to try and help the library service nationally'.

The vision of the group leading the transfer of Library C was not political, but reflected their emergence from a church based group. They saw an 'opportunity of serving the community of being involved in the community, building on what we do'. This involved, 'learning for living' which included not just a library but also a credit union, courses, IT equipment – generally a broad approach to 'social inclusion and trying to encourage people' (Library C). Similarly, the transfers of Library F and G were led by existing Forums. The function of the forum described by a Library F volunteer, 'is to create a better life for everybody – not specific to the library'.. The Forum tries to support or provide whatever services are needed, for example; English classes for refugees, a nursery and health education. So these organisations are led by a general vision to improve society, and the library is just part of that.

These examples illustrate a degree of 'progressiveness'. The situation is understood as a consequence of the cuts in expenditure affecting the Council. Two groups have challenged the details of the council's approach. Three groups had been informed by a general desire to improve the quality of life in the local community, and it's implied that the voluntary sector's actions are necessary to achieve this. But as the church led group at Library C acknowledged; 'The political thing, we've never really engaged with it.'

Austerity and progressive localism after transfer.

Following transfer the work of libraries changed in ways which might not have been anticipated. Libraries were becoming community spaces which also provided a library service. The council development officer saw this as a very positive development: ‘if they continue to show some of the innovations that some of them have done and the willingness to participate with the community and work really strongly with the community ... very much community led organisations with a flexibility to respond really quickly to local needs which is a bit more difficult for something as large as the council as much as we'd like to.’ (Council interviewee). Library F and G became a natural extension of the extensive range of community services already offered by the Forums who had led their transfer. Library C was similarly an extension of community support led by the local church. This was reflected in an acceptance that the main positive outcome of volunteering might be to the volunteer, rather than to the library: ‘sometimes it takes a little while for them (volunteers) to get to grips with what is going on in the library - but you see people grow and change which is ... part of why we're here’ (Library C).

Other libraries extended the services offered. For example, Library D had allowed a local church without a meeting place to use its building; had made links with a park friends group; invited a local author to talk; run book sales and cake shows; as examples.

Library H envisaged developing as ‘a community hub - extending the building by opening up the attic, the basement, the garden, giving access with a lift’ (Library H). The library had discovered its site included a historically significant garden, which it wanted to develop. It has plans for a crèche, it ran 8 events in the local festival, a children’s reading

class, an event with two local authors with over 750 attendees ‘queueing out the door and down the street to get into the library.’ (Council Interviewee).

All these changes could be regarded as progressive. The flexibility of this sample of libraries to adapt to local needs has been reported elsewhere (Forbes, et al. 2018). However libraries were also acutely aware of the need to increase income to become economically viable. Future capital costs associated with the buildings were a major concern. A lack of clarity over responsibility for these liabilities has prevented all but one associate library signing leases with the council. For example, Library H was estimated to require £1.5m investment across the building and garden. Library B, a 50 year old building, had a leaking roof. Irrespective of capital costs all libraries were aware they would need to try and raise revenue sufficiently to compensate for the projected withdrawal of council subsidy in March 2017. For example, Library H estimated it needed to raise £25,000, or about £500 per week.

What could be interpreted as progressive changes, in terms of greatly increasing use by a wide range of community groups, also had an aim of increasing revenue. In this way there was a synergy between progressive localism, and austerity localism. However, this was difficult because the potential for raising income was not large. Several libraries gave examples of small scale income generation. Further, people are used to a free library service and do not expect to have to make a donation for it, in the same way they would other charities.

While libraries were aiming to increase revenue they were not hopeful they would become economically sustainable. On the other hand, they were aware of the political capital invested in keeping them open. As one said, ‘we had to make plain to the council that If we

went down, they'd go down with us.'

Refining 'progressive

Perhaps it is setting the bar too high to expect volunteer run libraries to be led by a broad utopian vision of a society in which wealth was more equally distributed and national policies were not subservient to the needs to multi-national capitalism. How could they meet Featherstone's criteria of "transcend(ing) their immediate locality and ... feed(ing) into broader social and political movements that aim to transform national and international policy frameworks, thereby reversing the neo-liberalisation of inter- and extra-local relations" (Featherstone et al. 2012, p.118)? This might be possible if a collective vision was articulated by an organisation representing libraries across the country (in a similar way to the co-operative movement 200 years ago).

However, at a local level they can be led by a vision of a 'better way' or providing a community service. As in any volunteer led organisation, the driving force is the shared enthusiasms and values; and more work is needed to tease these out. These have led to a different way of organizing; which is not the public sector, and not market led; and illustrates an alternative ignored in most management education (Parker, 2018). Thinking of them as merely replacing paid employees by volunteers within the 'total social organisation of labour' (Taylor, 2005) misses the point that these organisations are qualitatively different. They are driven by values, including; the value of a library service per se for present and future generation; and a responsibility to serve and enrich the local community. The 'means' of delivering a library service are as important as the 'ends'. Volunteers are different to paid

employees because of the co-operative nature of the psychological contract (Nichols, 2013) which implies a more democratic approach to management. Volunteers are respected as having a democratic right to influence the organization – not as a unit of production.

Conclusions

Hegemony can be challenged by degree and within constraints. Library groups, by their very existence, are challenging the assumption that libraries should close as a consequence of public expenditure cuts. They are offering an alternative way of providing local services through local association: associative democracy. Some groups were led by a vision that socially necessary work to increase welfare could be provided in a different way, and some by an implied vision of a society in which the welfare of the disadvantaged was increased (Library G, Library F, Library C). But both local government and volunteer led groups are acting within the constraints of national government policy, as Fenwick and Gibbon (2015) concluded in their study of the transfer of one leisure facility. While the working class groups that Levitas (2012) uses as examples from the last 200 years were both practical and led by reformist visions, the volunteers leading asset transfer of libraries are constrained by a pragmatic choice between replacing paid workers by volunteers acting as ‘blue rinse job thieves’; or not having a library. Thus they are also constrained by a hegemonic view of the possible, rather than being open to opportunities revealed by a ‘hermeneutics of faith’ (Levitas, 2012) in alternatives. They lack a reasoned critique of the present, and an alternative view of the future. It is the role of academics to provide this; for example, Bregman’s (2017) vision of utopia and Raworth’s incisive critique of the assumptions underpinning neoliberalist economic hegemony (2017); which would inform a national movement.

There is a synergy between a progressive expansion of use of the library and generating increased revenues through new users. However, the only library which appeared to be a commercially viable proposition was Library D, as the main building was taken over by a brewery as a pub and café. This reflects the nature of the leisure market, in which commercial operators can bid to run swimming pools and leisure centres, but not libraries by themselves. If the future of public libraries is framed within a hegemonic constraint of commercial viability, then those that survive may follow the Library D model. As our interviewees reported, it is not clear how libraries can raise funds to cover running and capital costs in the long run. The present situation may be a temporary fix to avoid the negative political consequences of facility closure.

Thus this study develops an understanding of ‘progressive localism’ in the way it has been used to describe volunteer led groups reacting to cuts in public expenditure (2015; Featherstone, et al., 2012; Fenwick, & Gibbon, 2015; Williams, et al. 2014). It shows that if ‘progressive’ is to be defined as challenging neo-liberal hegemony, it has to be related to the extent to which the constraints of that hegemony are accepted. In our examples the volunteers have accepted the parameters of choice between replacing paid employees by volunteers or not having a library. To broaden that choice needs an expansion of the image of a better society, inspired by a hermeneutics of faith, combined with a critique of ‘neo-liberal capitalism: in the broadest sense extending to it being as ‘likely not just to impoverish most, but to kill us all’ through environmental devastation (Levitas, 2012, p335). This requires eloquent presentation of political and economic alternatives.

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